

Healthy Oral Habits

Snacking

Snacking a lot during the day can increase the risk of developing tooth decay. Plaque, a sticky film of bacteria, forms on your teeth all the time. When you have foods or drinks that contain sugar, the bacteria in plaque produce harmful acids that attack your tooth enamel. These acids can stay in your mouth for up to 20 minutes after you eat. Frequent acid attacks can break down the enamel and cavities can develop.

To keep your smile healthy, limit snacks and eat well- balanced meals made up of foods from the five major food groups:

- breads, cereal, pasta and other grains
- fruits
- vegetables
- meat, fish, poultry, dry beans, eggs and nuts
- milk, yogurt and cheese

If you need a snack, choose wholesome foods for good general and oral health. Skipping soda can cut down on both tooth decay and empty calories. Try water or skim milk instead. Crave something crunchy? Eat an apple or a handful of nuts instead of chips.

Oral Piercing and Mouth Jewelry

You may be thinking about, or may already have, piercings or mouth jewelry. While many people think this trend looks cool, it has many harmful side effects. Here are some common risks of oral piercing that you may not know about:

- Millions of bacteria live in your mouth, so oral piercings may become infected easily.
- Your tongue — the most popular piercing site in the mouth — could swell large enough to block your airway.
- Piercing can cause uncontrollable bleeding and nerve damage.
- You can choke on studs, barbells or hoops that come loose in your mouth.
- Teeth can chip or crack from contact with the jewelry.
- Bacteria that breeds around your piercing can cause bad breath.

Since your oral health is important for overall health, the effects of an oral piercing may have a greater impact than you think. You are not only risking your oral health, but also the well-being of your entire body.

Smoking and Chewing Tobacco

No one wants to kiss a smoker—bad breath and yellow teeth are some of the less serious side effects, It is possible that smoking may lead to periodontal (gum) disease. Red swollen gums are a symptom of periodontal disease. Periodontal disease can also lead to tooth loss. Smoking lessens your senses of smell and taste so you will not enjoy food like you used to.

Most importantly, smoking cigarettes can cause cancer. Smoking can also lead to other medical problems like emphysema and heart disease.

Chewing tobacco is different than smoking cigarettes. In addition to increasing your risk of periodontal disease, smokeless tobacco may have sugar in it to make it taste better. This sugar can cause you to develop cavities.

Even worse, smokeless tobacco brings cancer-causing chemicals in direct contact with your tongue, gums and cheek. The early signs of oral cancer usually are not painful, so people often ignore them. If it is not caught in the early stages, oral cancer can require painful, sometimes disfiguring, surgery and can lead to death.

There is no upside to tobacco use. If you smoke or chew, your dentist can help you quit.

Mouthguards

A properly fitted mouthguard, or mouth protector, is an important piece of athletic gear that can help protect your smile. You should use a mouthguard during any activity that could result in a blow to the face or mouth.

Mouthguards help prevent broken teeth and injuries to the lips, tongue, face or jaw. A properly fitted mouthguard will stay in place while you are wearing it. It should be easy for you to talk and breathe.

There are three types of mouthguards:

- the ready-made, or stock, mouthguard
- the mouth-formed “boil and bite” mouthguard
- the custom-made mouthguard made by your dentist

All three mouthguards give you protection, but differ in comfort and cost. Don't take your teeth for granted. Protect your smile by wearing a mouthguard.

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders damage the entire body, including your teeth. Two such eating disorders are Bulimia Nervosa and Anorexia Nervosa.

Bulimics binge-eat and then purge, or rid, the food from the body by vomiting or other means like using laxatives, diuretics or diet pills. The digestive system contains strong acids that break down food. When bulimics use vomiting to purge food from the body, these acids attack tooth enamel. If the vomiting continues over time, the acid can erode tooth enamel.

Bulimia can cause:

- worn and translucent teeth
- a swollen and tender mouth, throat or salivary glands
- bad breath

Anorexics do not use bingeing and purging to control their weight. Instead, they starve themselves. This robs the body of necessary nutrients, including calcium. This can cause osteoporosis, a thinning of the bones and loss of bone density. Bones in the jaw that support teeth can weaken, leading to tooth loss.

Talk to your dentist or physician if you think you or someone you know may have an eating disorder.